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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 000294

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM ET

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: OPPOSITION CANDIDATES RECOUNT FURTHER HARASSMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

REF: ADDIS ABABA 002645

Classified By: Classified By: CDA John Yates for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)
)

¶1. (C) Summary: Two senior ethnic Oromo leaders from the opposition coalition Forum report being physically abused by police, militia and civilian agents of the ruling party during a recent visit to Western Oromia to register candidates for the May elections. The two leaders have not filed formal complaints because they believe Ethiopian Government officials are responsible and any review of the incidents would be biased. Both said they would likely not return to Oromia to continue to register candidates because they feared their safety was at risk. End Summary.

¶12. (C) Poloffs met on February 2 with Major Mekonnen Gelata, a member of Parliament and Central Committee member of the opposition Oromo People's Congress (OPC) -- one of the eight parties comprising the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Unity Forum (Forum) -- and OPC member Colonel Asrat Tekaligne for a report on their January 25-29 trip to the East Wellega zone of Western Oromia to register candidates for the May 23 regional and national parliamentary elections. (Note: There are 14 woredas (municipality equivalents) in East Wellega zone. End Note.) Mindful of previous difficulties with local authorities during an October trip to East Wellega, Mekonnen and Asrat notified the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) in advance that they planned to register candidates at NEBE branch offices in the East Wellega zone. (Note: Proclamation 532/2007 of the amended electoral law allows candidates to register in person or via a third party expressly authorized by their party for the purpose. A candidate registering in person at a local NEBE office must present evidence that he/she is both a local resident and, if registering as a candidate of a particular party, has the endorsement of that party. Parties are required to inform local NEBE branches by letter of the names of their candidates and the specific seats (whether federal or regional parliament) for which they intend to run. If a candidate is not physically present to register, a party representative may present these same documents on his/her behalf, along with proof of the party's authorization to register absentee candidates. End Note.)

FORUM OFFICIALS GIVEN RUN AROUND
BY LOCAL AUTHORITIES

¶13. (C) Mekonnen and Asrat traveled to Nekemet woreda (county seat equivalent for East Wellega zone) on January 26 and did not encounter any problems, registering one candidate for the national parliament and three candidates for the regional

parliament. When traveling to the smaller Gida Ayana woreda, however, Asrat reported that five traffic police stopped them in Guten town, 50 km. from Nekemet. According to Asrat, one of the policemen confiscated the license of their driver and told them it would be returned after they paid an 80 ETB (6 USD) fine in the nearby town of Gida Ayana for not having a vehicle permit. (Note: Large commercial vehicles and buses require permits in Ethiopia, but a passenger car like the Land Cruiser Mekonnen and Asrat occupied do not require permits. End Note.) Asrat said that when they reached the town of Dicho, five km. from Gida Ayana, seven policemen accompanied by what he called a "large armed militia" searched their car, frisked them, and told them to turn around without paying the fine. Mekonnen and Asrat were told by members of that group that they were acting under the authority and orders of a Gida Ayana-based official named Lemesa Gerbi. (Note: A check by embassy with local authorities found Lemesa listed as &the executive member of the Gida Ayana Administration in charge of security.⁸ End Note.) Asrat said that they went back to Nekemet, where a woman working in the Roads Office gave them a paper stating their vehicle did not require a permit. According to Asrat, a traffic police officer who had followed them from the scene at Dicho took the paper and &disappeared with it.⁸ The next day, on the morning of January 27, Mekonnen and Asrat paid the fine anyway, but according to Asrat, the policeman holding the driver's license in Guten, would not accept the receipt because he claimed it was paid in the wrong jurisdiction. They continued on their journey with their driver deprived of his license, but there was no further incident regarding that particular technicality.

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NO ROOM AT THE INN

¶4. (C) Asrat recounted to Poloffs that when they visited his home woreda of Arjo, they could not find a room to stay in at any hotel in town. According to Asrat, hotel staff told them that even the smallest hotels were sold out, because the Government had reserved all rooms. He said he heard the Deputy Commander of the woreda police threaten their driver by saying he should leave the town as fast as he could or his car would be blown up and his life would be in danger. The driver subsequently drove to a nearby town for the night. Asrat said they found a &storeroom⁸ in which they slept for the night with police and militia noisily walking on the roof and banging on the door throughout the night.

SUCCESSFUL REGISTRATION OF CANDIDATES
IN THREE WOREDAS

¶5. (C) Mekonnen and Asrat said they went to the NEBE branch office of Arjo on January 28 and Asrat was able to register his own candidacy for the national parliament as well as register three other candidates for the regional parliament. Asrat and Mekonnen were also able to register candidates at both national and regional levels in both Nunu Kumba woreda and Diga Koloba woreda without incident.

POLICE AND MILITIA REPORTEDLY STOP CAR
AND THROW STONES

¶6. (C) Asrat recounted that they then traveled to Limu Gelila woreda, where, they said, a group of ten uniformed policemen, three militia men, and two civilians ordered them out of their car and proceeded to frisk them, search the car and luggage, with one of them saying &we don't want bandits in our woreda,⁸ and "go back to where you came from." Asrat stated that when the crowd began to throw rocks at the car, they got into the car and drove away quickly. Asrat and Mekonnen told Poloffs they then went to Finchawa woreda and found the NEBE branch office on an Ethiopian Government compound, where the guard would not let them in. Mekonnen said they could see NEBE workers inside the NEBE office building looking on. Mekonnen said they began to yell loudly

to draw attention to themselves and the guard finally let them in. Once they were inside the NEBE office, the NEBE officials would not accept the same party authorization letter with their list of certified candidates that had been accepted in Nekemet and Arjo. They were therefore unable to register the OPC-designated candidates.

¶17. (C) In Kombolcha woreda, Mekonnen's constituency and home town, the two leaders reported to the NEBE branch office. Mekonnen and Asrat recounted coincidentally running into a man named Abebe Beri, outside the NEBE office, who told them he wanted to run for the regional parliament as an OPC candidate. Mekonnen and Asrat reported that upon their arrival at the NEBE, there was someone video taping their encounter with Abebe as he began screaming at them and provoking a fist-fight. (Note: Abebe Beri was an OPC member during the 2005 election period and was jailed for his activities after the election. Mekonnen said after Abebe Beri was released from jail he joined the Oromo People's Democratic Organization, (OPDO), an affiliate of the EPRDF. End note.)

ALLEGED BEATING BY MOB AT KOMBOLCHA
NEBE BRANCH OFFICE

¶18. (C) Mekonnen and Asrat reported they had to wait three hours before they could register Mekonnen's own candidacy. When they were about to finalize his registration and those of two absentee candidates, Mekonnen stated that a group of twenty men, many of them known to Mekonnen, had collected in the NEBE entrance. He said the men began to scream at them and physically carried Mekonnen, Asrat, and Regional OPC party member Seleshi Belay out of the NEBE office building into a courtyard where they were beaten, and had their watches, glasses, wallets, and Asrat's briefcase taken from them before the group fled. Mekonnen was finally able to complete his own registration for the national level parliament and Seleshi Belay was able to register at the regional level. They were unable, however, to register the two absent candidates, Lemesa Temesgen and Ebisa Beyene,

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because the OPC authorization letter had been destroyed in the episode. (Note: An Amharic-speaking British diplomat reported to Pol/Econ Counselor on February 4 that Ethiopian state television had broadcast on February 3 film of the Mekonnen-Asrat-Abebe encounter but not the fracas that followed. End Note.)

HARASSMENT REPORTED TO NEBE IN ADDIS ABABA

¶19. (C) Throughout the trip, Mekonnen and Asrat said they reported the unfolding events to the NEBE in Addis Ababa. Asrat said he spoke with NEBE official Ato Nega, who is in charge of the West Region and Kenea Yedeta who is the East Wellega Zonal Administrator. Asrat said Nega promised to follow up, but that he also wanted to hear "the other side of the story from woreda officials."

OPC CANDIDATES BELIEVE HARASSMENT ORDERED FROM ADDIS

¶10. (C) Mekonnen and Asrat told Poloffs they believed government officials in Nekemet woreda, in coordination with the Addis Ababa-based Oromia Administration, had given orders to the local woreda police and militia to harass them. Mekonnen and Asrat also believe the NEBE was in collusion with the officials in Nekemet. Mekonnen and Asrat stated the head of the NEBE office in Nekemet, to whom they appealed in an effort to resolve their complaints locally, replied only that he was "powerless to do anything if an opposition party had a disagreement with the central government." When queried if they planned to register their complaints with the Joint Council of political parties created by the Code of Conduct, Mekonnen said they would talk to their party to decide if there was utility in using the new mechanism, but emphasized that he remained skeptical of the effectiveness of

election laws passed by the Parliament. Mekonnen and Asrat both said they would probably keep pursuing their candidacies in the upcoming election, but both added they were unlikely to go back to East Wellega to continue to try to register OPC candidates. (Note: The candidate registration deadline has been extended by 20 days from February 2 to February 22. End Note.)

¶11. (C) Comment. Post cannot verify the extent to which the candidate registration obstacles encountered by Mekonnen and Asrat in East Wellega were orchestrated by the ruling party as they believe. What is obvious to us, however, is that the mechanisms set up by the NEBE and the newly legislated electoral Code of Conduct are ill-equipped to correct such pervasive and diffuse harassment as these two leaders allege.

We will nevertheless urge leaders of the OPC, and the Forum coalition of which OPC is part, to pursue the available claims process, if only to test its bona fides.

YATES